

The City

Attacking Modern Myths

Edited by Alan Powell
for the University League for Social Reform

Chapter 19

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Responsibility, Bureaucracy, and the Long View

Hans Blumenfeld

1972

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Department of Sociology, University of Toronto.

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19. Responsibility, Bureaucracy, and the Long View

Hans Blumenfeld

Everybody seems to be agreed that our cities are in a mess; but who is responsible for this?

Our cities have been and are being built, in the main, by private enterprise, "the developer." When he is accused of not giving the people what they need and want, he protests that he is willing and able to give them a better product at a lower price, but that he is hamstrung at every step by "red tape," laws, regulations, restrictions, permits, endless delays, which always increase the cost and often lower the quality of his product. And he is right.

Who makes the laws and regulations and also decides to provide the infrastructure on which the developer depends? Obviously the legislators at all levels, the elected representatives of the people, "the politicians." When the politician is accused of not giving the people what they need and want, he protests that he is doing his best, but that he has to rely on the best "experts" which he can find to inform him of the consequences of his decisions on the complex urban system and to implement the many technical details. And he is right.

The expert, civil servant or consultant, is a "technocrat," and the technocrat has become the *bête noire* of latter-day populism. He is the "faceless" man who, from his hiding-place in the depths of a bureaucratic labyrinth, conspires to frustrate "the will of the people." But if and when a "common man" – desperate or hopeful – succeeds in penetrating the fortress and comes face to face with the monster, the latter as likely as not, will assure

the visitor that he sympathizes with his difficulties, but that his hands are tied by laws and regulations, and that the visitor's problem really is the responsibility of an other department. And he is right.

He is right because we have succeeded, to a considerable degree, in implementing one of the most basic and cherished tenets of liberal democracy: "Government by Law, and not by Men." Checks and balances prevent him from doing total good. Government by law is, by definition, faceless government.

This never becomes a complete reality in a small and simple community. The citizens of Athens could meet face to face with "Aristides the Just" (and throw him out when they got fed up with justice). But when one deals with the complex interactions of millions of people, it is inevitable to abstract out of the totality of their individual lives a series of common characteristics such as age, sex, income, etc., in order to satisfy them in their roles as residents, workers, commuters, shoppers, recipients of recreational, medical, welfare etc., services. People become "Statistics."

We regard the population as made up of "dividuals" instead of "individuals," said Torsten Hägerstrand, quoting one of his students.¹ Hagerstrand further says: "In the main, people are viewed as parts of activities to be performed within each domain in isolation, and not as entities who need to make sense out of their paths between and through domains," and, "in total, seen from the point of view of the individual, this is an enormous maze about which he personally can do very little."

No wonder that the individual caught in this maze feels alienated. The root cause of alienation, in the words of Karl Marx, is the "enslaving subordination under the division of labour"; and he concluded that the necessary condition for emancipation from alienation is for the working people to re-appropriate the means of production. A necessary, but not a sufficient, condition, as the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch remarked in a conversation.

The individual, alienated as a cog in the machine of production, and caught in the many wheels within wheels which make the metropolis go around, revolts and demands that "people should control their own lives." No demand could be more legitimate: "Power to the People!"

But which people?

The currently fashionable answer is: the people of the "Com-

¹ Torsten Hagerstrand, Presidential Address. Regional Science Association, *Papers*, Volume XXIV, 1970, pp. 7-21.

munity"; "Community" referring to the present residents of a more or less clearly defined territory within the metropolis, numbering usually a few thousand persons. It is claimed that they should determine not only how schools or playgrounds are to be run, how streets should be cleaned or garbage collected – the "software" of municipal government – but also they should determine the "hardware": what should be built in the territory, an apartment house, hospital, or shopping centre, a school or a park, a road or subway, a water or sewer main.

Most of these structures are to serve an area well beyond the territory of the "community," and all of them are destined to serve for a long time, fifty or a hundred years. Some of them will begin to serve only after five or ten years. But three quarters or more of the people who will constitute the community fifteen years from today do not live there now. Who speaks for them? Hardly the present residents. Hardly the elected representatives whose time horizon is inevitably dominated by the next election. So the question remains: who speaks for the people who are not yet there?

The late Norbert Wiener once said, before an audience of city planners, that the best investments ever made were the great mediaeval cathedrals, because they were built by the Church not just for their own day, but "*sub specie aeternitatis*." No other body thinks in quite so long a time span. It may however be recalled that dynasties, aristocratic or monarchic, were concerned with the fate of their "House" in centuries to come.

I am not advocating a return to theocracy or monarchy or aristocracy. But the need for a long time horizon continues to exist. Certainly many citizens are concerned about the future of their city, but by and large they have no organized voice, and certainly no organized role in government. In some countries political parties, strongly committed to a specific image of society, have been willing to risk a loss of votes for the sake of the ultimate triumph of their principles. This is hardly typical of Canadian parties, and certainly not of municipal officials elected as non-party individuals.

In fact, there is only one body in government who can afford to take a longer view: the technocrats. Protected by their civil service status and committed to their "professional standards," they can and do think in terms of the long-range and city (or metro) wide "public interest" – as they see it.

They see it, as Hagerstrand's student noted, in terms of "dividuals" rather than of individuals. The Roads Department helps

the individual to drive around, the Sewage Department helps him to get rid of his excrements. These are certainly important functions of the individual, but they are hardly the whole person. One department is responsible for one "dividual," an other for an other; as Tom Lehrer so aptly put it,

"I just put them up; where they come down – That's another department," says Wernher von Braun."

Power and Planning

There is, however, one group of technocrats who make the odd claim that it is their speciality to be "generalists": the city planners. They claim that their planning is "comprehensive": comprehensive in space, comprehensive in time, comprehensive in all aspects of the life of their plannees.

Patently there is a yawning abyss between this exalted self-image and the reality of city planning, in particular in North America. The reality is well described by Raymond Vernon: "... land use planning in any comprehensive sense really does not exist in our larger urban areas. What does exist is a complex game of chess among localities, each attempting to palm off the undesired applicants for space upon their neighboring communities. This is warfare, not planning."²

Two types of applicants are undesired.

First, as Vernon notes, "everyone wants the water, but no one wants the reservoir"; nor does he want the incinerator, the road, or the subway in his backyard. But second, and even more important, nobody wants the poor. Every municipality wants land uses which pay high taxes and require low expenditures. Poor people can pay only low taxes and they, and in particular their children, require high expenditures; they are "undesired applicants." Commercial and industrial buildings contain no children and are welcome; apartments contain few children and are acceptable.

Suburban municipalities, in which "the people of the community control their own lives," have long ago learned to use their powers of control to keep poor families out. The "Urban Renewal" legislation, enacted some twenty years ago in the United

² Raymond Vernon, "The Myth and Reality of Our Urban Problems" in: *Internal Structure of the City*, edited by Larry S. Bourne, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1971.

States, has given the central cities a weapon to beat the suburbs at their own game. They cannot, like the suburbs, keep the poor people out; they are already there. But they can try to throw them out, by tearing down the houses in which they live and replacing them with structures which yield higher taxes. This criminal policy is rationalized as "slum clearance" for the sake of "higher housing standards." In fact, the war against the slums becomes a war against their victims, the "War on Poverty" a war against the poor. And, as I told the 1967 Annual Meeting of the American Society of Planning Officials, "both the suburbs and the central cities are enlisting the planners as mercenaries in this merciless class war of the "haves" against the "have-nots."

Warfare, not welfare.

It is only fair to note that the municipal governments, in acting as they do, carry out the generally voiced wishes of their constituents. They all want lower taxes and better services. The people who suffer, in the case of the suburbs, are those who are not there. In the case of the central city, they are there, but are a minority. Rightly, this minority has begun to fight back.

By organizing themselves as a "community," the residents threatened by "renewal" have copied their more affluent fellow citizens who typically have established "Ratepayers Associations." While these do not have the same interest in taxation as their fellows in the suburbs, they pursue the same goal of keeping out "undesirables," and undesirable is not only the reservoir etc., but also anyone of lower socio-economic status, because his presence threatens to lower the selling price of their properties. They have been quite successful in pursuit of this goal by bringing pressure to bear on their elected representatives. "Community control" of development would arm them with the formidable weapons which the suburban municipalities in the balkanized metropolitan areas of the United States are using so successfully in their disastrous "bellum omnium contra omnes." In Metropolitan Toronto this war is at least mitigated by the power of the technocrats to pursue the area-wide long-range "public interest" – as they see it.

They see it, of course, in terms of the power structure which they serve. If they are to see it differently, the power structure will have to be changed. This is not a question of "the community versus the technocrat." It can be decided only by the political class struggle.

About the Editor

ALAN POWELL was born in the United Kingdom and has lived, studied, and worked in Canada since 1961. He has taught urban sociology and mass communications at the University of Toronto since 1966 where he is affiliated with two colleges, Erindale and Innis. He was one of the first faculty members at Erindale where teaching began in 1967 and was also active in non-teaching activities. (From 1967 to 1969, he was chairman of the college's Art Committee and began their collection of modern Canadian art.) His cross-appointment at Innis College began in 1971 when he inaugurated a continuing duo of action-oriented undergraduate courses called "Power and Strategy in City Politics."

He has contributed significantly to the style and direction of urban politics in Toronto since 1969 as founding chairman of SSSOCCC (Stop Spadina, Save Our City, Co-ordinating Committee) which played a key part in mobilizing Toronto citizens against the now-stopped Spadina Expressway. Presently, he is a director of the South of St. James Town Defence Fund, urban adviser to Pollution Probe, and a fund raiser and organizer for one of the reform candidates in Toronto's 1972 municipal election. The history of the Spadina battle is one of his current projects together with an almost-completed study in Georgetown, Ontario, of how people experience and participate in their communities.

About the Contributors

HANS BLUMENFELD is an internationally known planner and consultant as well as a prolific writer and radical. He studied architecture in Germany graduating in 1921, and practised briefly as an architect with Adolf Loos. Subsequently, he worked as a planner in Russia for the State Planning Institute in Moscow (1930-37), in New York (1938-40) and Philadelphia (1941-44 and 1953-55), and in Germany (1949). From 1955 to 1961 he was Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Planning in Metropolitan Toronto and developed the Metro Toronto Land Use and Transportation Plan. He was a leading advocate in 1970-71 for the completion of the Spadina Expressway and is still a planning consultant to the cities of Toronto and Montreal. He has taught at Columbia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and currently lectures at the Universities of Toronto and Montreal, in addition to continuing his private practice as a planning consultant.

HOWARD BUCHBINDER has been associated with Praxis Research Institute for Social Change in Toronto since 1969 and is continuously involved with citizen action and community organizing in the roles of both researcher and activist. He has been lecturing at McMaster University in the School of Social Work (1969-72) and acts as a consultant for the Manitoba government in the areas of urban and social welfare policy and implementation. In 1970-71, he was a member of the reform minority on the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Toronto Social Planning Council.

The City

ATTACKING MODERN MYTHS

EDITED BY ALAN POWELL

for the University League for Social Reform

Riddled with violence, beset by apathy, smothered in smog, choked with traffic—a place where we work but where we cannot live the good life. Must this describe our cities? Here is a group of Canadians who say No! In this unique and controversial collection of articles, essays, poems, and fiction, they examine the Canadian city and the myths we have about it. Housing, social services, neighbourhoods and urban participation, technocracy—all of these present challenges that must be immediately faced if Canadian cities are to become something other than uninhabitable concrete nightmares.

Since 1965, the non-partisan University League for Social Reform has brought together thinkers of all ideological persuasions from different professions and campuses across the country. Each year, the results of these continuing seminars are edited and published as books in order to provoke a wide public discussion of the issues. Although the focus is changed each year, from nationalism to foreign policy, from urban reform to social change, these books and their contributors share a common commitment to progressive reform within an independent Canada.

Alan Powell teaches urban sociology and mass communication in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. He was the founding chairman of the Stop Spadina committee which mobilized Toronto's citizens against the now stopped Spadina Expressway, and is presently urban advisor to Pollution Probe.

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